The Artist as Curator

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“The purpose of art is to question the material relationship to their world in relation to human beings. The purpose of curating is to agglomerate those questions and, in effect, to present them”

Throughout the centuries, history of art has been recounted, narrated and intertwined with the history of exhibitions. Combined with academic writing and critical thinking, art displays represented a supporting feature in rendering art history an affirmed academic discipline. However, in the last few decades the role played by exhibitions has assumed a prominent and undisputable part in the context of framing and understanding art. Since the late 1980’s exhibition making has become the main stage in which narratives around the practice of art started to take shape. It is in this context that the practice of curatorship started to be recognised as a distinct practice of mediation and the figure of curator moved from “being a caretaker of collection and a behind-the-scenes organiser to an independently motivated practitioner with a more centralised role within the contemporary art world”. Today, curators play an important part in the contemporary art scene. They have become professional figures who function as the “catalyst for interaction between the creative individual and society”; through the practice of exhibition making curators are responsible for organising and mediating messages conveyed by artists, finding the most effective way to seep them into society, contributing towards the shaping of our

1 Lawrence Weiner, “The Next Documenta Should Be Curated by Artists”, p.75
2 Paul O’Neil, “Introduction” in “The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)”, p.2
3 Jens Hoffman, “Introduction” in “The Next Documenta Should be Curated by an Artist”, p.7
experience of art. Although curatorship has developed into a bona fide professional role, due to its very recent origin, still today “the curator’s role appears already built into pre-existing art professions⁴”, rendering its true raison d’être “largely undefined⁵”. The contemporary artistic scenario consigned to us writer-curators, director-curators, critic-curators and various other combinations, are likely to prove the fact that the lines that define the profession of curatorship are blurred. Such combinations though, at times resulted in challenging surprises. One of the most interesting phenomena that invested the era of independent curatorship consisted of artists-as-curators, implying an exchange of roles, which brought along interesting experiments and results. By taking into consideration one case study, this paper will question the causes and effects entailed by the tendency of artists to take up the role of curators, examining whether such practice could result in a positive solution.

Artists and Curators are two different and distinct professions. As Boris Groys points out, “the artist has the privilege to exhibit objects which have not already been elevated to the status of artworks⁶”, whereas “the work of the curator consists of placing those artworks in the exhibition space⁷”. In the last few decades though, these categories tended to go towards a sort of dissolution, which resulted in the implication of a closer relationship between artists and curators and “a more visible involvement of artists in curatorial practice, often

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⁴ Christophe Cherix, “Introduction” in “A Brief History of Curating”, p.1
⁵ Ibid.
⁶ Boris Groys, “On the Curatorship” in “Art Power”, p. 43
⁷ Ibid.
resulting in artists curating exhibitions themselves. Such dissolution often developed into a large number of controversies which could be ascribed to the field of institutional critique, a field of enquiry which since the late 1960's became established as a set of critiques encompassing a large number of problematic questions linked to the very nature of public institutions, involving issues of authorship, personal taste and subjectivity.

Within the context of institutional critique, artist Daniel Buren pointed out that “the Museum makes its 'mark', imposes its 'frame' on everything that is exhibited in it, in a deep and indelible way”; according to Buren's words, the museums as an institution works as a conceptual frame for art and therefore it can be considered as an arena within which a certain artistic discourse as well as a set of meanings is delivered to the viewer, endorsing the idea that “the Museum/Gallery is not the neutral place one would like us to believe but certainly the single viewpoint from which a work is produced”. As Buren's argument illustrates, the philosophical and ideological foundations of museums started to be vulnerable towards a set of critiques which ultimately brought along a process of self-examination, resulting in the appearance of new phenomena concerning different strategies pertaining to the framing of meaning through new display methods.

Within this context, it comes as no surprise that the role of the curator has undoubtedly acquired a prominent and crucial position within the contemporary art scenario, since such

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8 Jens Hoffmann, “The Curatorialization of Institutional Critique” in “Institutional Critique and After”, p.325
10 Daniel Buren, “Critical Limits”, p.46
role encompasses the decisive responsibility of conveying messages and meanings by means of arranging exhibitions and displays. As Jens Hoffman points out, over the last three decades the works of curators started to be focused “on a newly articulated form of organisational creativity that gave rise to exhibitions based on particular themes or rather over-arching curatorial concepts11”; as a consequence, it can be said that “today the work of many curators manifests a thematic consistency and focus, so that their output is marked by a certain style and can thus be compared with that of an author12”.

By giving rise to a kind of artistic development within the contexts of their practice, curators have often given shape to “oeuvres not unlike a visual artist13”, and by so doing art institutions have been obliged to acknowledge that curators occupy a central role in the development of exhibitions, which at times lead to a series of controversies.

As Paul O’Neil points out, “many curators supported the idea of curating as mode of artistic production14” aiming to make of an exhibition a work of art itself. As Jens Hoffmann's writings on the subject previously illustrated, during the last three decades or so, the work of curators has undoubtedly been highly influenced by artistic frameworks, leading to the appearance of a mutual influence between the two practices. Although exhibition making conceived as an artistic oeuvre involves a peculiar attention to detail in delivering a specific

11 Jens Hoffmann, “The Curatorialization of Institutional Critique” in “Institutional Critique and After”, p.325
12 Jens Hoffmann, “The Curatorialization of Institutional Critique” in “Institutional Critique and After”, p.324
13 Ibid.
14 Paul O’Neil, “Antagonism to the New Curatorship” in “The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)”, p.127
aesthetic experience to the viewer, as a practice it has often been highly criticised. The problem connected with this practice consists in the imposition of a certain taste and subjective view on the art displayed by the curator-artist which often results in the mystification of the initial message instilled in the works of arts. To go back to some of the notions correlated to Institutional Critique, such attitude resulted in a subversion of hierarchies and power-systems within the structures of institutions; as Robert Smithson pointed out in regard of this debate, “Cultural confinement occurs when a curator thematically limits an art exhibition instead of asking the artists to set their own limits”, leading to the conclusion that independent curatorship must be practiced within the limits and in respect to the artists' works, in order to avoid mystifications of meaning.

An example of how this attitude can encompass negative outcomes, can be seen in the practice of curator Eric Troncy; with his trilogy of exhibitions “Dramatically Different”, “Weather Everything” and “Coollustre”, Troncy explored different questions relative to the very notion of an exhibition by imposing his role of a curator as an auteur, a creator of narratives and meanings on top of those conceived by artists. Troncy’s exhibitions have often been criticised as spaces where “works are often forced to sit with one another, on top of one another”, confirming the idea that an excessive imposition of taste by the figure of the curator can result in an extreme imposition of meaning.

15 Robert Smithson, “Kulturbeschränkung, Katalog der documenta 5”, p.1167
17 Ibid., p.128
If the attempt of curators to become “artists” in the process of exhibition making did not always entailed effective outcomes, on the other hand the trial made by artists in grappling
with the practice of curatorship seem to have produced interesting outcomes. “As a result of the recognition by museum curators of artists’ intuitive sense of perception and presentation, there has been a growing tendency for museums to invite artists to choose and arrange material for their collections”; as James Putman explains, artists deal on a day-to-day basis with questions of presentation and display as part of their practice. Because of this, in the last few decades several artists have been committed to curate exhibitions upon requests of museum directors who discerned the artists’ tendency to adopt selective criteria, which reveal “the diversity of their individual interests, which help to deconstruct the impersonal nature of museum displays.” By raising questions about the habituated institutional approach to the construction of an exhibition, artists tend to choose to arrange objects which may be of less significance in the eyes of curators, giving life to arrangements which rupture the status quo of displays, opening up the possibility for the viewer to experience the museum or gallery space in a different way.

During a conversation with curator Hans Ulrich Obrist concerning the practice of curating approached by artists, conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth stated: “in my show, I invited the viewer to participate with me in the reading and experience in the play of the meaning that my juxtaposition produced.” Joseph Kosuth is an artist whose practice primarily explores the role of meaning in art. Renowned as one of the pioneers of conceptual art, his works generally explore the nature of art itself and linking to Wittgenstein’s philosophy of

19 Ibid.
20 Joseph Kosuth in conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist, Visual Cultures Lectures Series, Royal Academy of Art
language and Freud’s psychoanalysis, they interrogate questions of meaning often in tautological and self-referential terms. Alongside his career as an artist, Kosuth also ventured in the role of curator giving life to remarkable shows which interestingly seem to reflect the conceptual framework upon which his artistic research is articulated, resulting in the creation of spaces where “the viewer is invited in a meaning making process”\(^{21}\) entailed by his art.

“Sigmund Freud and the Play on the Burden of Representation” can be considered as a striking example of Kosuth's curatorial practice, which reveals a gripping dialogue and commentary both on an artistic and curatorial level. Designed in occasion of Freud's seventy-fifth death anniversary, the show took place at 21er Haus in Vienna in October 2014. By selecting works of over seventy artists including his own, the show deals with “the heritage, continuity, and topicality of Freud’s topography of the psyche in contemporary art"\(^{22}\), presenting the numerous approaches that artists undertook towards the theme. Within the framework of the exhibition, Kosuth adopted an intriguing curatorial approach, which is likely to embody the notion of exhibition as a work of art by deploying peculiar displaying devices. The point of departure for venturing inside the exhibition is an awareness towards the force of influence that Freud's theories had on a wide range of subjects, from psychoanalysis to philosophy and language. As Helen Young Chang noted, it is crucial to understand that “just as language acquired new meanings after Freud, so did

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\(^{21}\) Ibid.

art\textsuperscript{23} and in this regard it can be said that Joseph Kosuth's exhibition successfully substantiates this point. Articulated through several galleries within the museum, the exhibition presents a succession of atmospheres, which attempt to show how different artworks encapsulate, allude or critique different aspects of Freud’s theories. Within this context, Kosuth's own installation Zero & Not, consisting in “passages taken from Freud's writings printed as wallpaper and then obscured with black tape, it serves as a key to the rest of the show\textsuperscript{24}”, inaugurating a dialogue which incorporates the whole body of works of the remaining artists.

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\textsuperscript{23} Helen Young Chang “Sigmund Freud and the Play on the Burden of Representation”, in http://www.artnews.com/2014/12/31/sigmund-freud-the-play-on-the-burden-of-representation-at-21er-haus/
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.
In the following rooms, Kosuth made use of subverting displaying methods which primarily function as remark of his analytical artistic practice, based “in a very essential manner on language and can be understood as a reflection of perception and its processes as such,” and on a further level, it also serves to install a challenging dialogue between the works of other artists. One of the arrangements juxtaposes photographer Francesca Woodman and Cindy Sherman's self-portraits appealing to repressed feminine constructs, drawing from Freud's concepts of repression; another display presents notions of fetishism entailed by the works of Markus Schinwald Dictio Pii (2001) and Ilya Kabakov’s installation The Man Who Flew into His Picture (1987–89); a direct reference to Freud as a historical figure is taken on by the duo Clegg & Guttmann that reconstructs, through replicas, his library. Along with many other works of art, the exhibition presents itself as a thrilling ensemble of a body of ideas which cohesively consign to the viewer a consistent grasp of Freudian concepts articulated by means of contemporary works and enriched by a conceptual aesthetic taste, which undoubtedly materialise Kosuth's curatorial approach.

In this regard, as the artist himself stated, the focal intention of his curatorial work consisted of “rupturing the status quo of how exhibitions are made and doing that by raising questions about the habituated, institutionalized approach to the construction of an exhibition”; as previously mentioned, such challenging and ambitious attitude has been undertaken by a large number of curators during the last fifty years, but there is a consistent difference that underlies between the artists and the curators' approach. Such difference can be seen in how, within Kosuth's art display, a certain narrative flourishes within the juxtaposition of the works of art rather than being imposed. As the artist made clear, his primary intention
consisted of avoiding “imposition of authority and claim of validity\textsuperscript{26}, and by so doing it can be said that his exhibition reflect the leading ideas that characterise his art practice concerning the production of meaning, offering a deep insight into his belief that “art must be able to see itself and the world inside itself\textsuperscript{27}, without necessarily imposing a certain message. When a curator attempts to give shape to arrangements which seek to embody a totalising all-embracing superimposed narrative, as previously illustrated by Troncy's practice, the major risk he might come across consists in the imposition of meanings which might overlap with those ones intended by the artists' work, resulting in misleading or confusing messages.

Although Kosuth’s curatorship represents one of the most recent and influential approaches to exhibition making, he is not the only artist who took on the role of curator in the contemporary art scene bringing to light successful and thought-provoking results; two crucial predecessor of Kosuth's exhibition are Clas Oldenburg and Fred Wilson, whose intriguing and provoking projects serve to confirm how artists-as-curators, by giving life to unconventional displays challenged the rules of exhibition making.

Between 1965 and 1977 artist Claes Oldenburg gave life to \textit{The Mouse Museum}, a satiric project aimed to provide a commentary on the obsessiveness of collecting emblematic of modern consumerist societies; by appropriating the museum as an artistic medium, shaped

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\textsuperscript{26} Joseph Kosuth in conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist, Visual Cultures Lectures Series, Royal Academy of Art
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\textsuperscript{27} Ibid.\end{flushleft}
on the iconic contour of Mickey Mouse, Oldenburg created a “microcosm of objects which is meant to reflect not only his working process but also his perception of stereotypes in American societies”. Inside The Mouse Museum, a building within a building, more than four hundred miniature consumer objects are gathered following no specific hierarchy, ultimately inviting the viewer to reflect on the distinction between everyday items and museums objects, and the consequences that the dissolution of such distinction implies.

In an equivalent challenging manner, with In Course of Arrangement, an exhibition that took place at the British Museum in 1997, Fred Wilson “challenged the museum visitor to think beyond the conventional museum interpretation of artefacts”. By featuring objects from the museum's Department of Egyptian Antiquities, Wilson addressed to the viewer issues of acquisition history, disrupting canonical exhibitory narratives.

As illustrated by the example mentioned so far, the tendency towards artist becoming curators resulted in the achievement of positive outcomes articulated through displays which, in line with issues of institutional critique, served as catalyst means to pose question on the very nature of institutions. Such tendency became a legitimate trend to the point that in 2002 curator Jens Hoffmann questioned the relationship that artists have to the profession of curating in depth, gauging the views of several artists on this issue and whether or not the worldwide renowned international exhibition documenta should be curated by an artist.

29 Ibid. p.134
30 documenta is an exhibition of modern and contemporary art that takes place in Kassel every five years. Featuring arts from all continents, documenta was born as an attempt to bring Germany artistic scene back to life after the Nazi period.
As the responses towards this question formulated by artists show in the documents gathered by Hoffmann, artists seem to have controversial views upon this issue. As Julia Scher stated, “the ideal artist-as-curator is an artist who has deeply minded a certain vein of artistic practice, and has reached a reflective, introspective point in his career\(^{31}\), which implies that not every artist could undertake such responsibility. Today curating does represent an important perspective and possibility for art to be formulated and mediated, implying that such role cannot be undertaken by everyone. Exhibition making requires passion and humility, as well as the acceptance of the fact that the real storyteller within the discourse around art is the artist, not the curator.

To conclude, it can be said that the figure of the artist as a curator, does not represent a solution but rather a possibility. By making use of their peculiar sensibility towards an aesthetic sense of display, as Joseph Kosuth and several other artist-curated shows successfully displayed, artists can supply for some self-oriented curatorial practices occurring today, providing intriguing solutions for the production of meanings.

\(^{31}\) Julia Scher, “Artist-As-Curator” in “The Next Documenta Should Be Curated by an Artist”, p.69
Bibliography


Online Sources


Further Online Sources


Images


(3) Overview of Joseph Kosuth's exhibition “Sigmund Freud and the Play on the Burden of Representation", 21er Haus, Vienna, October 2014
(4) Clegg & Guttman's recreation of Freud's library, in “Sigmund Freud and the Play on the Burden of Representation”, 21er Haus, Vienna, October 2014

Other Sources